

**Statement by Edil Baisalov  
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**Before the House Committee on International Relations  
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Let me express my deep appreciation for the opportunity to testify before you today.

When President Bush appealed in his second inaugural speech this January to the nations around the world, to ‘all who live in tyranny and hopelessness’ with the promise that ‘the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors’- that sent a powerful message across the world. People do listen to what the head of the most powerful nation has to say. In fact, the newspaper that I edit back in Kyrgyzstan, *The Demokrat*, splashed these words across its front page within hours of the beginning of President Bush’s second term. On the eve of the crucial parliamentary elections in February, many of our readers, democratic activists, non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders, party members, journalists and members of parliament continued to discuss the meaning of President Bush’s words, ‘When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.’

And the Kyrgyz people did stand up for their liberty. Following the fraudulent parliamentary elections of February 27 and March 13, in which the leading opposition members were either barred from running or faced the full use of government resources to defeat them, the people of Kyrgyzstan protested against these results and demanded genuinely free elections. The people had long been frustrated by the one-man rule and the corruption that had developed around the former scientist-turned-dictator, and were no longer willing to accept that their representatives be handpicked by the government.

The Akayev family took under its control most profitable businesses and lucrative state contracts and made it impossible for local or international entrepreneurs to do business in Kyrgyzstan without sharing profits with the family. The Akayevs personally made tens of millions of dollars from business with the United States-operated airbase, monopolizing the supply of fuel as well as pocketing money from lease agreements.

One striking example of the Akayev government’s corruption was trade with China. The Chinese reported annual volume of trade turnover with Kyrgyzstan as 480 million dollars, while official statistics released by Akayev’s regime put this figure at 80 million.

This is just one example of how the cost of corruption and inefficient government the Kyrgyz people came to bear was enormous. Poverty could not be adequately addressed with customs and tax revenue not being collected properly and international aid money being siphoned away. At the same time, public discourse was increasingly stifled, with

opposition leaders, independent journalists and civic activists intimidated and persecuted by the government. Despite this, government propaganda and numerous private electronic media outlets monopolized by President Akayev portrayed Akayev as a democratic leader and hailed Kyrgyzstan as ‘the country of human rights.’

Just a little more than a month ago, on March 24, as the result of several weeks of popular protests, Askar Akayev and his family were forced to flee to Russia, putting an end to the authoritarian regime that had ruled Kyrgyzstan for fifteen years since the break up of the Soviet Union. In their protest actions against Akayev, the Kyrgyz people were inspired by the success of the ‘people power’ displayed most recently in Georgia, where the Rose Revolution in November 2003 ousted Eduard Shevarnadze, and the Orange Revolution of Ukraine, which was a refusal to accept the falsified results of the presidential elections at the end of 2004. Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution marked the third time in 18 months that a democratic movement came to power at the result of peaceful resistance in the former Soviet Union.

So what role did the United States of America play in these transitions? How did the US government keep the promise made of standing with peoples earning for liberty?

First of all, the credit for the achievements belongs to the people of the respective countries; the U.S. government played no direct role in these events. We believe that the assistance provided by the United States directly to Kyrgyz civic groups and indirectly through NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, Freedom House, Internews and International Foundation for Electoral Systems was instrumental in helping creating the space for political dialogue, raising civic awareness and providing support for civil society. However, what happened in Kyrgyzstan in early 2005 was the result of Kyrgyz people advocating their own interests and beliefs through groups that they had created themselves.

The organization that I represent, the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, is one such group. The Coalition is an umbrella group uniting more than 170 NGOs around Kyrgyzstan, which joined forces six years ago to advocate for democratic reforms. Since 1999, the Coalition has monitored more than ten elections and referenda through fielding long-term and election day domestic non-partisan observers. Our nonpartisan reporting on the elections and recommendations on helped improve the process and resulted in many amendments of the election code.

With funding made available by USAID through NDI, we have trained thousands of civic activists, local council members and election observers. We trained and deployed more than 1,700 election observers throughout the country for both rounds of parliamentary elections, and produced reports, statements and press releases to provide the public with a domestic, nonpartisan evaluation of the election process before, during and after the elections.

The work of the Coalition was assisted in the parliamentary elections by the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). ENEMO is a group of 17 civic organizations, including the Coalition, from sixteen countries of the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. These nonpartisan organizations are the leading domestic election monitoring groups in their countries. In total, ENEMO member organizations have observed more than 110 national elections and trained more than one hundred thousand election monitors. ENEMO seeks to support the international community's interest in and support for democracy in the post-communist countries of the OSCE region, to assess electoral conditions and the political environment, and to offer accurate and impartial observation reports.

ENEMO international observation missions, such as the short-term monitoring mission in Kyrgyzstan in February and March, evaluate the electoral process using international standards for democratic and fair elections and benchmarks in the assessed country's legislation and constitution. The Coalition is an active member of ENEMO; I was a co-chair of the mission in Ukraine for the presidential elections in November.

Besides the importance of supporting local and regional groups, U.S. embassies play a critical role in these transitions. In the recent democratic breakthroughs in Georgia and Ukraine we saw that the most crucial roles belonged to Ambassadors Miles and Herbst, who ensured that American politics were articulated as clearly as possible and the international support was marshaled.

US Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Stephen Young also deserves recognition in greatly supporting the desire of the Kyrgyz to live in a free society. Throughout his time in Kyrgyzstan, Ambassador Young frequently met with civic activists around the country, speaking with journalists, students, businessmen and political party leaders to articulate US support for democratic development. Ambassador Young maintained a direct dialogue with President Akayev while also urging him publicly to respect the international commitment of Kyrgyzstan to democratic reforms. In the months preceding the revolution, Ambassador Young came under repeated attack by the Kyrgyz governmental press, which tried to depict him as violating international norms of conduct and accused him of interfering in the internal affairs. Despite a number of activities aiming to discredit him, Ambassador Young stood steady in his call for democracy in Kyrgyzstan. Previous U.S. Ambassadors to Kyrgyzstan also deserve credit for being vocal and visible supporters of democracy. It cannot be overestimated how important this sort of support is for local democratic activists.

Another vital area for building democracy is mass media. During the time of the Soviet Union, Radio Liberty was one of the only ways for the people to hear accurate news and information about their own society and the world. Radio continues to play an important role throughout the former Soviet Union today in providing balanced coverage of the events. A year before the presidential elections in Ukraine, authorities shut down FM radio stations that transmitted Radio Liberty. The authorities in Kyrgyzstan shut down Radio Liberty two weeks prior to the elections. The Kyrgyz service Radio Azattyk

served as the only outlet through which the voters could learn about the latest developments.

However, in the name of reaching mass audiences, proud traditions of the Radio Liberty are recently being forgotten. For example, the RFE/RL Russian Service no longer airs programs on human rights directed to the many Russian speakers in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The recent steps at commercialization of international broadcasting, with the primary focus on increasing the number of listeners at the cost of downgrading or lowering the quality of the content, are shortsighted and should be reviewed. It would be useful for the Congress to consider funding an independent study of the current role of international broadcasting as an important element in American public diplomacy and as a valuable way of promoting democracy and the development of civil societies.

Consideration should be given to on-air educational broadcasting - teaching English or about the role of religion in various democratic societies - to countries such as Turkmenistan, where educational systems are being dismantled by the state. Television broadcasting should be launched to the whole of Central Asia, based in Kyrgyzstan.

Although fifteen years have passed since the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the ghost of communism still continues to exert its toll on these post-totalitarian societies. No one should assume that the fall of the Soviet Union brought about automatic end to totalitarian ideology. While there have been a considerable amount of activities towards the rebirth of civil society and raising civic awareness, it is clear that until the post-communist societies undertake a special effort to evaluate their pasts and recognize all of the evils of totalitarianism, we cannot say that liberty and human rights are strongly rooted in our societies. It should come as no surprise that in many countries, nostalgic feelings for the totalitarian past and 'iron fist' rule are on the rise again, while the majority of the population still views the *gulags* (forced labor camps) and Holodomor (Ukrainian famine in the 1930s) as unfortunate incidents in Soviet history.

The United States should consider establishing a special program to study the history of the communist regimes around the world since 1917 and the ways to overcome continuing influence of the communist and other extremist ideology today.

I also believe that democracies must befriend people, not dictators. Student and other activist exchange programs must be expanded. Ten years ago I myself benefited from the generosity of the American people through the Freedom Support Act. I was awarded a scholarship that allowed me to attend high school in Columbus, North Carolina. Thousands of former exchange students like me are now entering key positions within business, the government and the civic sector. It is clear that only continued expansion of people-to-people public diplomacy efforts such as student exchange programs will ensure a better understanding of each other and a celebration of humanity, democracy and human rights.

Note: The Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society received \$114,000 in the last fiscal year in US government funding through USAID and NDI.